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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001225

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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P FOR HMUSTAPHA AND RRANGASWAMY
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEMAYEL DOWNBEAT ON RAPPROCHEMENT WITH
SYRIA, NERVOUS ABOUT ELECTIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William K. Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Former president Amine Gemayel reacted pessimistically August 19 to outcomes from President Sleiman's August 13-14 visit to Syria. He assessed Syria was willing to make minor concessions to Lebanon only to improve Syria's reputation within Lebanon. Gemayel criticized the international community, specifically the U.S. and France, for offering too many "carrots" to Syria, rather than sending strong messages to make Syria "afraid." Gemayel was adamant that serious pressure on Syria was needed to avoid supporters of Syrian and Iran from winning Lebanon's 2009 parliamentary elections. Gemayel would not be drawn into a discussion of March 14's unity or strategy for the election, instead repeating the need for the international community to send "signals" as the key. End Summary.

GEMAYEL: DON'T EXPECT MUCH FROM SYRIA

12. (C) Former president and March 14 leader Amine Gemayel was in an ornery and despondent mood during an August 19 call by Charge Grant and Poloff. Gemayel told us not to expect too much from Syria following President Sleiman's August 13-14 visit to Damascus. He called the anticipated establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries "peanuts". There was little tangible progress made, he said, on other important issues to the Lebanese, such as Lebanese prisoners in Syria, Syria's official denouncement of claim to Sheba'a Farms, and the dismantling of the Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council. In his view, Syria would take advantage of the opportunity to open diplomatic missions throughout Lebanon to openly increase its presence and influence here.

FRUSTRATION WITH THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

13. (C) Gemayel said he was uncomfortable and frustrated with the international community's current overtures towards Syria, particularly those of France. He criticized the attempts to lure Syria into the international community's mainstream because, he said, if the efforts fail, it would be Lebanon that suffers, not France or the U.S. Gemayel defined the balance of power in Lebanon as currently tipping

towards Syria's advantage. He opined the only way to counter Syria's open financial, military, and political support to its allies and supporters in Lebanon would be by sending "strong signals." Examples he gave of strong messages included the establishment of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the transfer of the four generals held in Lebanese custody in connection with the 2005 Rafiq Hariri assassination to detention in the Netherlands under the control of the UN Special Tribunal. He said he had raised his criticisms with French President Sarkozy and planned to do so again when French Foreign Minister Bernard Kuechner visits Beirut on August 23.

¶4. (C) Gemayel repeated several times his belief that "perception is reality." He believed the perception among the Lebanese now is that the U.S. has retreated from its support for Lebanon that was shown in 2005. He called for a stronger, more material show of support to blunt "the Syrian-Iran influence" in Lebanon. He cautioned that Lebanon was not strong enough on its own to confront the challenge and could not rely on Saudi Arabia, for instance, because it does not have the same power or means in Lebanon. Despite Charge's explanation of the expansive USG military support in Lebanon, Gemayel called for more. Furthermore, he assessed the U.S. was not dealing with the threats to Lebanon (i.e. Hizballah and Iran).

ELECTIONS 2009: CRITICAL
TO LEBANON'S FUTURE

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¶5. (C) The 2009 parliamentary elections, Gemayel said, would be critical to shaping the future of Lebanon. Within the March 14 coalition, Gemayel admitted mistakes had been made, particularly in its response to the May 2008 crisis. But he also had expected a stronger response from the U.S. and the international community during the May crisis. The March 8/Michel Aoun opposition had benefited from those events. For the 2009 elections, Gemayel said the psychology of the voters needs to change to prevent Aoun and Hizballah from gaining greater support. He believed voters have the perception Aoun and Hizballah supporters are gaining ground in the field, although he believed the March 8/Aoun platform is fundamentally weak.

¶6. (C) Gemayel favored the strategy of reaching out to specific constituencies (i.e. in Beirut, Bikfaya, and the Chouf) with strong messages that put pressure on Syria. He was less convinced about the effectiveness of March 14 candidates running on a unified platform to win the elections. In addition, Gemayel was dismissive of polling conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) of voter perceptions and issues of importance. (Comment. The reason for Gemayal's dismissiveness may be that the IRI polling shows Gemayal's support among Christian voters, his constituency, is in the single digits. That compares to 20-23% for both his Christian rival within the March 14 coalition, Samir Geagea, and opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun. End Comment.)

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Gemayel was in a sour mood about everything and not in a mood to talk much about March 14 unity and strategy for the 2009 elections. When asked about that, he simply repeated his message about the need to send signals to Syria. There were no warm and fuzzy messages regarding his March 14 allies. The best he could manage was to claim that March 14 is "doing its homework" for the election. As we were walking out of Gemayel's home, Selim Sayegh, vice president of his party, tried to reassure us that in fact March 14 leaders including Gemayel realize they must work better together as a coalition to win the 2009 election. End Comment.

